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ABSTRACT

A reading theory which distinguishes between reading as a passive recognition process and a cognitive participatory activity requiring active interpretation is discussed in this article. The method, considering reading as "thought and dialogue," stands in opposition to conditioned response theories basic to audiolingual methodology. It is proposed that language instruction be individualized to encourage students to develop their own cognitive processes and intellectual capabilities. (RL)

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Reading as Thought and Dialogue

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What if all the things that have been claimed for liberal education turned out to be true? What if even part of them turned out to be true? What if they were not only true but translated into practice? What difference would it make?

In the teaching of reading it would bring about a radical restructuring of prevalent classroom theory and practice.

It has been traditionally claimed, for example, that liberal educatibn appeals to the mind, trains it, and makes it self-directing, but if we survey the materials available for teaching reading of foreign languages and sample the use of them in the classroom, we find an implicit assumption to the contrary. Most of them rely upon a teacher-centered decoding process: a text with marginal or footnote glosses plus an end vocabulary enables the student to decipher the text, and the teacher tells him whether or not his attempts are correct. Reading is in fact assumed to be a passive recognition process synonymous with word identification --- a student can read a page when he can identify all the words on the page and associate them with a referent. Memory thus becomes the chief tool in the learning process. There is usually little provision for vocabulary building except the memorization of the words deciphered, and discussion of the passage is based upon a questionnaire which asks the student to recall information given in the text. The whole class proceeds at the same pace because it depends on the teacher for the verification of meaning.

It is time for us to reappraise these commonly-held assumptions and to look at new strategies. If liberal education in general and foreign language teaching in particular have fallen upon evil days, it may be to some degree because they have abandoned the principles upon which they were predicated.

As a contribution to the discussion I would like to sketch out a cognitive approach to reading which might be described as "reading as thought and dialogue." It stands in opposition to the conditioned response theories that have undergirded much audio-lingual methodology. As "thought" it relies on and appeals to the intellectual processes much more than traditional methods. As"dialogue" it views the purpose and process of reading as the generation of new ideas and personal response. Because it is cognitive, it lends itself easily to a kind of individualized instruction which is presently being so widely discussed.

A cognitive view of reading first of all parts company with the idea that reading is a passive recognition process. It is more than an accumulation of vocabulary. It is more than word identification, for it always involves an active effort of interpretation.

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As Frank Smith suggests in his recent book Understanding Reading[1] it consists of "reducing uncertainty" by making things fit, by sorting out unacceptable meanings. Moreover, the mind is always active, not only organizing new sensory information but also leaping ahead and anticipating what is coming next. The visual system is in fact incapable, because of the neural bottle-neck of the short-term memory, of getting information to the brain fast enough to account for reading if the brain itself is not conveying messages to the senses telling them what to look for. Smith summarizes a cognitive view of language as follows:

> "All perception is the result of a decision-making process that reflects past experience and future expectations as well as the information being received at the moment. A reader . . . extracts meaning from his environment (reduces his uncertainty) on the basis of the visual information (the surface structure of the language) and all the deep structure of language and knowledge of the world at large that is within his brain . . . language could not be comprehended unless the reader made this critical contribution." (p. 69)

It seems quite clear that something like this hppens in everyone who learns to read. For example, the mind automatically gives a different interpretation to the phrase "John walked" as the context is changed from "in the evening" to "in the room" or to "in the seventh inning." And in addition to interpreting familiar words, the mind also uses the context of what is known to define what is unknown. A student who has a recognition vocabulary of 20,000 words has not gone to the dictionary 20,000 times. Rather, he has learned many, perhaps most of his new words simply through the intellectual processes of the mind working on context.

If this is the way the mind really works the key to learning to read a foreign language is to activate this potential as soon as possible.

It follows from this view that the general pedagogical problem is that of getting from the initial stage of mediated reading to non-mediated or immediate reading. This concept may be illustrated by what economists call the "take-off point," i.e. that point at which a developing economy ceases to be dependent on outside investment and becomes self-generating. In the initial stages of reading, the establishing of meaning is mediated by the identification of individual words which in turn are mediated by the teacher or the format of the text. The "take-off point" is that point at which the reader begins to use the text to define itself, at which he passes

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Frank Smith, Understanding Reading: A Psycholignuistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston) 1971.

Karl Sandberg
Macalester College

from dependence on the teacher or format to dependence on his own cognitive processes. It is the point at which he can: 1) recognize the grammar signals of time, person, sequence, cause, conjunction, etc. sufficiently to impose a configuration on his perceptions, and 2) associate enough words with referents to answer the question "What's it about?"

Two tactical problems derive from this central concept: 1) how to get the student to the take-off point as soon as possible, and 2) what to do once he is there.

The first step toward getting the student to the take-off point is to establish linguistic priorities in the presentation of the new language, for all words are not equally important or equally hard to learn. The first priority should be given to structures and function words, which are relatively few in number but high in frequency (they account for 40-60% of the words on any given page of prose) and which provide the means for contextual inference. An example of the use of the grammatical signals is seen in the following paragraph:

> The wind was flooping through the reegs of the trees. The night was sak and fleen. George umphed igishly and pulled his long heavy blug around the back of his hick. What the skwg was he doing here? Suddenly, a stort rang out, and a fleegul whumped to the earth with a heavy leem. Alas, George askaluked, I should have known better, what will poor Gwendolyn do now? [1]

Of the sixty-nine words in this paragraph, fourteen are completely new, yet the general meaning is accessible to the reader who is attentive to the context and the grammar signals. Until the student can recognize the structures his "reading" cannot go beyond the stage of word-for-word deciphering.

Closely allied to the priority given to structures and function words is the way in which grammar is presented. Grammar presented as rules to be memorized or as prescriptions to be followed often becomes onerous or meaningless. Presented from the point of view of function, as a tool of cognition, it can become stimulating and exciting. This point was illustrated one day in a class of basic reading for illiterate adults when one sixty year old man became so excited he could not sit still. He had just learned that ay says /e/ and that he could now identify thirty or more words that he had not been able to recognize before. He also realized that there were other regularities, other keys to opening up the world of reading, and that he could learn them and use them. Instead of having one more experience with failure, he had a new sense of adequacy and power, which is part of the concept of "reading as thought." To see

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1 -Sandberg and Schubert, Le Nouveau Passe-muraille (Appleton-Century-Crofts), p. VI

Karl Sandberg
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if grammar has been presented in this way, one need only ask a simple test question: "What will the student answer if I ask him what he can do now that he couldn't do before?"

Next, or perhaps parallel to the teaching of the structures should come the acquisition of the most easily taught vocabulary, for even though word identification is not synonymous with reading, it is an indispensable part of reading and likewise provides the stuff or context.

For this purpose content vocabulary items can be distinguished by three characteristics, as being cognate (similar in spelling to an English word) familiar (within the experience of the student) and tangible (can be shown by a picture). They may then be placed into one of eight categories for the Germanic and Romance languages:

1. Cognate, tangible, familiar, e.g. table
2. Cognate, non-tangible, familiar, e.g. nation
3. non-cognate, familiar, tangible, e.g. chaise
4. non-cognate, familiar, non-tangible, e.g. mauvais
5. cognate, non-familiar, tangible, e.g. métope
6. cognate, non-familiar, non-tangible, e.g. monade
7. non-cognate, non-familiar, tangible, e.g. ficaire
8. non-cognate, non-familiar, non-tangible, e.g. sourcilleux

The familiar cognate vocabulary is easily taught by getting the student to see the patterns, analogies, or sound shifts between the two languages. The new name for non-cognate, tangible, familiar items can be taught rapidly by programmed exercises employing pictures and either oral or written cues. If initial instructional materials are built around the vocabulary of the first three categories, students can progress very rapidly toward the take-off point. It follows that this approach places the initial emphasis on comprehension rather than on the equal and concomitant development of the four skills.

A second step, especially with students who have had previous acquaintance with the language is to have the student diagnose his own deficiencies. At Macalester the first thing a student does at the beginning of the intermediate course is to take a diagnostic test and to establish his linguistic profile, in this case a catalogue of structures that he does not recognize. He then makes out his own syllabus for work with programmed materials dwelling on the recognition of structures. He then works through his own difficulties at the pace he himself has set. The teacher keeps himself informed of the student's progress but devotes the class time to other activities. By individualizing this part of the course progress is accelerated toward the second stage of reading.

As the student acquires the means of establishing context it is important, as a part of the concept of dialogue, to get him to ask questions of the text, e.g. simply "What's it about?" and "How do things fit together?" This idea is closely related to another principle: train the student from the outset to look for the whole context.

Reading as Thought and Dialogue

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Macalester College

These ideas seem simple and yet the format of the traditional reader leads, almost forces, the student to a word-by-word deciphering which is not reading, i.e. the establishing of meaning. Most teachers have a file of fractured translations made into English during the exams. Take for example the phrase taken from the Daudet story, "L'Elixir du révérend Père Gaucher," where Father Gaucher has succumbed to the temptation of his own liqueur: "Il dégustait son péché par petits coups": "He was disgusted with such a small fish." "He loathed his sin." "His fowl fish was served in a small cup." Such boners could come only from someone who had been allowed to fall into the idea that language is simply individual words.

In order to cope with this problem and to provide linguistic support without encouraging a word approach to reading, we developed a semi-programmed format for second-year work. The selection is broken down into paragraph length bits and the student is asked simply to read the entire paragraph underlining unknown words. Following the paragraph is a programmed analysis of the lexical and structural difficulties which the student works through in 3-6 frames. He then re-reads the paragraph. Almost invariably the difficulties are cleared up, even those which are not programmed. Whether this format or another is used, it is hard to over-estimate the importance of getting the learner to look for whole thoughts.

Up to this point the cognitive aspects of the strategy I have been describing are seen in the way the student approaches the text and the learning process. The individualized aspect of the instruction has consisted of enabling the student to find out where he is and to proceed as directly as possible to the goal of being able to use context. The support he needs is given by diagnostic testing and by programmed materials tailored to his particular needs. The control previously provided by the teacher is shifted to the student's own cognitive processes.

When he reaches the take-off point the implementation of the "thought and dialogue" concept is enlarged and the concept of "individualized" instruction is modified.

At this point the student should start to do extensive independent reading in his fields of interest. It should not necessarily be intensive reading, but should familiarize him with the learned and popular press of the new language. At the same time, in the class room the concept of "dialogue" should be developed, not dialogue in the sense of conversations to be memorized (which are ironically the antithesis of dialogue) but in the sense of response and exchange of reactions and ideas. The dialogue may be developed between student-author, student - teacher and student - student.

This view implies first that our courses should be endowed with substantial intellectual content which evokes a response from the reader, and readings should be chosen according to their ability to strike a spark.

Reading as Thought and Dialogue

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At this point we must also part company with the text format which calls for a rehash of the content of the reading. Discussion takes the form of agreement or disagreement and the reasons why rather than of answering "What happened next?"

"Reading as Thought" also implies training the student in techniques of analysis. We see what we expect to see. Teach him to look for the stylistic aspects of the text --- how does the author start, how does he get from one point to another, etc. --- and reading becomes the basis for writing and expression, since it gives the student both form and ideas.

The role of the teacher thus changes. He is no longer there as the purger of the linguistic stables, nor as drillmaster, nor as critic or judge. Without abdicating his role as leader, he gives up the stance of superior - inferior, and in the Socratic tradition responds to his interlocutors and helps them to see where their ideas lead. The classroom ceases to be entirely the place where errors are corrected and becomes instead the place where people talk about and express what they have read.

In summary, I have been discussing a system of individualized instruction which is flexible enough to meet the needs of each student and is calculated to evoke a personal and intellectual response. The role of materials programmed for self-instruction is limited but necessary, for they alone can provide both the flexibility and support to bring the student to the point where he can be self-directing. The orientation of the entire foreign language sequence should be toward the utilizing and developing of the cognitive processes or intellectual capabilities of the students. Only in this way can foreign language study contribute to the liberal education in which it is grounded.